

Madam Chair, members of the committee, thank you for taking the time to hear this bill. And Representative Wagoner, thank you for sponsoring this important piece of legislation.

My name is Bryan Haines. I live in East Helena and my wife is a fifth grade teacher at Radley Elementary. We have a five-year old that will start kindergarten next year and a four-month old baby who will one day be a part of the East Helena School District. This bill and the potential it has for my family, our school district and the community is something that means a lot to me and my family.

I attended elementary, middle and high school just up I-15 in Cascade. My graduating class was the largest in school history, a booming 47. I participated in several sports, after school programs, FCCLA, AP Calculus, Pep Band -- it was as well-rounded of an education that anyone could ask for. It was also your typical, tight-knit Montana community, where everyone knew everyone and they always knew how to get a hold of your parents. In fact, whenever I got in trouble (which I like to think wasn't often) my mom knew about it before I got home. And this was before cell phones and texting! My wife grew up in Conrad, and she would share the same thoughts and experiences, although her parents definitely got called more than mine did!

When we graduated from the University of Montana, job opportunities took us to Las Vegas, Nevada. We always knew we would come back to Montana to raise our family, with one of the major reasons being the great school systems in this state. There are wonderful teachers all over this state, including Helena, Billings and Missoula. There is no questioning that.

Living in Las Vegas, especially with my wife teaching, we saw firsthand the challenges that extremely large class sizes present, both to teachers and students. Even the best teachers and most engaged students are prone to struggle with large class sizes. When we left Las Vegas, we figured those challenges were behind us. Unfortunately that is not the case. Overcrowding at Helena High School is a serious problem. Hundreds of kids are forced to eat their lunch wherever they can find space, including on the floor. A high school math teacher shouldn't be expected to adequately teach geometry to a class of 35 or more students. A shy eighth grader, who after three years of middle school is just now starting to feel comfortable and blossom, will almost always go back into their shell when thrown into an overwhelming sea of students. No one in this room would argue against the fact that smaller class sizes help foster a better learning environment. That is one of the main reasons I am here today. If this bill is passed, it allows the K-8 school districts of East Helena, Lockwood and Missoula Hellgate to explore the possibility of moving to a K-12 school district. That potential expansion would allow my children to have a school environment very similar to the one that I thrived in at Cascade, and my wife in Conrad. It would be the same learning environment that I am sure many members of this committee or your constituents back home were at one time or are currently a part of. Not only would this create smaller class sizes in the school districts that wish to expand to K-12, but it would also do the same for Helena, Missoula and Billings, as their class sizes would also be reduced with a reduction in their student population. Every student in these districts would benefit from this, and the well-being and learning environment of these children should be the focal point.

During this session there has been a lot of discussion regarding school choice. This bill is in fact, a school choice bill. It allows three communities, which by the way are among the 25 largest districts in the state, to have the choice to potentially expand to a K-12 school district. It allows the parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, daycare providers, neighbors, business owners, etc., to say yes, we want a high school, now let's take the steps to make it a reality. Some folks will say that the tax math to build a high school just doesn't add up or that the community has never really backed bonds in the past. But as you all know, there is more than one way to fund a project if it is really wanted and these communities have never had the opportunity to back something as transformational as this.

If this bill is passed, it does not mean that ground will be broken tomorrow to start building a new high school or that new high schools will be popping up all over the state. The passage of this bill means that these three communities will have the choice to make their own decision on the education of their children. I can't think of anyone better to make that decision than the parents and the community members who interact with these children daily.

Thank you for your service and your time, and please vote yes on HB 634.

Submitted by Bryan Haines

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